

The Fire of Love and the Salvation of All: Syriac Visions of Eternal Hope

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the theme of universal salvation in the Syriac tradition by analyzing the theological and literary writings of three representative authors: Bardaisan of Edessa, Ephrem the Syrian and Isaac the Syrian. Although coming from different historical and doctrinal contexts, these thinkers develop, in distinct ways, a vision of the relationship between divine love and the final destiny of humanity that is distinct from the condemnatory emphases of other patristic Christian traditions. The study highlights how Bardaisan articulates a cosmological model of the restoration of universal order, how Ephrem uses poetic symbolism to express the hope of integral reconciliation, and how Isaac explicitly affirms the idea of a salvation of all, underpinned by a theology of absolute compassion. Through a comparative approach, it is shown that at the heart of Syriac thought is a conception of divine fire not as punishment but as purifying love. The study thus contributes to the revalorization of a marginalized theological tradition that is essential for understanding the diversity of eschatological visions in early and medieval Christianity.

KEYWORDS: Universal salvation, Christian universalism, Syriac tradition, Divine fire, Universalist eschatology.

TITLU: „Focul iubirii și mântuirea tuturor: viziunea siriacă asupra nădejzii veșnice”

ABSTRACT: Acest studiu investighează tema mântuirii universale în tradiția siriacă, prin analiza teologică și literară a scrierilor a trei autori reprezentativi: Bardaisan din Edesa, Efreem Sirul și Isaac Sirul. Deși provenind din contexte istorice și doctrinare diferite, acești gânditori dezvoltă, în moduri distincte, o viziune asupra relației dintre iubirea divină și destinul final al umanității, care se distinge de accentele condamnatorii ale altor tradiții creștine patristice. Studiul evidențiază cum Bardaisan articulează un model cosmologic al restaurării ordinii universale, cum Efreem folosește simbolismul poetic pentru a exprima speranța unei reconcilieri integrale și cum Isaac Sirul afirmă explicit ideea unei mântuiri a tuturor, susținută de o teologie a compasiunii absolute. Printr-o abordare comparativă, se arată că în centrul gândirii siriace se află o concepție asupra focului divin nu ca pedeapsă, ci ca iubire purificatoare. Studiul contribuie astfel la revalorizarea unei tradiții teologice marginalizate, dar esențiale pentru înțelegerea diversității viziunilor eshatologice din creștinismul timpuriu și medieval.

CUVINTE-CHEIE: Mântuire universală, Universalism creștin, Tradiție siriacă, Foc divin, Escatologie universalistă.

INTRODUCTION

Since its beginnings, Christianity has oscillated between two major emphases in soteriology: one centered on divine judgment and the idea of a final selection of the saved, and another, less prominent but persistent, which affirms the irresistible and all-embracing character of divine love - a love that not only judges but heals, not only separates but unites¹. Remarkably, the Syriac tradition has been a fertile theological space for the development of the second perspective, expressing an eschatological vision in which the salvation of all beings becomes not only possible but desirable and, in some cases, inevitable.

¹ Alexandru Lazăr, “Orthodox Response to Christian Universalism: The Theological Perspective of Pavel Florensky”, *Khazanah Theologia* 5, no. 3 (2023): 173.

This vision is formulated in various ways by three authors central to the understanding of Syriac thought: Bardaisan of Edessa (2nd-3rd century), an author often considered marginal, but whose cosmological and anthropological ideas lay the foundations for a reflection on the ultimate harmony of creation; Ephrem the Syrian (4th century), a poet and theologian who develops an implicit soteriology in a symbolic key, in which divine mercy penetrates to the deepest layers of human existence; and Isaac the Syrian (7th century), an ascetic and mystic of compassion, who openly affirms the universality of salvation and the unlimited character of God's mercy. These authors, though separated by centuries and different doctrinal orientations, are united by a common intuition: the fire of God is the fire of love, not of condemnation; it is a fire that cleanses, not consumes; a fire that heals, not destroys.

This paper aims to analyze in depth the representative texts of the three thinkers in order to highlight the convergences and differences between their perspectives on the final destiny of humanity. The study will also contextualize these visions within the broader patristic debates on hell, free will, divine justice and the restoration of all things (apokatastasis). In contrast to dominant Western approaches marked by legalism and moral dualism, the Syriac tradition proposes an integrative and therapeutic vision of salvation, in which God does not punish in order to do justice, but heals in order to restore.

Through this exploration, the present paper seeks not only to reconstruct a relatively marginalized theological direction, but also to open a space for dialogue between Christian traditions on the nature of God, human freedom and the ultimate hope of creation. The central question remains a deeply topical one: is God's love strong enough to overcome not only sin but also the denial of freedom? And if so, what implications does this have for our understanding of judgment, hell and eternal communion?

BARDAISAN OF EDESSA

The apokatastasis theory of Bardaisan of Edessa is one of the earliest forms of this doctrine in Syriac Christianity, illustrating an interesting synthesis between early Christian thought and Near Eastern Gnostic and philosophical influences¹. Bardaisan (154-222 AD), Syrian theologian, philosopher and poet, was one of the most influential figures of early Syriac Christianity, although many of his ideas were considered heterodox by the later official Church².

The term apokatastasis (from the Greek ἀποκατάστασις) meaning 'restoration', 'return to the original state'. In Christian theology, it is associated with the idea of the final restoration of all things - including sinners and demons - to a state of harmony and unity with God. Origen being the most famous promoter of this idea in the Greek tradition, but Bardaisan had already developed his own interpretation of this theory, influenced by the dualistic views of Gnosticism and the philosophical traditions of the Mesopotamian area³.

The theory of apokatastasis in the thought of Bardaisan of Edessa reflects an original synthesis between the Christian doctrine of salvation and the philosophico-religious influences of the Hellenized East, especially moderate Gnosticism and Mesopotamian astrology. Bardaisan conceived the history of the world and of man as a providential unfolding, marked by freedom of choice and the possibility of the final restoration of the divine order.

¹ Izabela Jurasz, "Destiny, Nature and Freedom According to Bardaisan and Alexander of Aphrodisias: An Unknown Aspect of the Controversy Against Determinism," in *Women's Perspectives on Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*, ed. I. Chouinard et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), 133.

² Ilaria Ramelli, *A Larger Hope? Universal Salvation from Christian Beginnings to Julian of Norwich* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 22.

³ James Ford, *Recalling The Ancient Christian Universalism Bardaisan*:

https://www.patheos.com/blogs/monkeymind/2023/07/recalling-the-ancient-christian-universalist-bardaisan.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawKO6-JleHRuA2F1bQlxMAABHi4UY1AwJEQ4aiAxp-ZwQA7yDWGa6IJ9FG2F6KUQ2dDQ2kxWELvLG6dYIL_aem_vkxtdwTp3JgbLwsOpB4u1A, accessed on May 10, 2025.

Bardaisan, from the same period as Origen and very likely earlier than him, held the same theory of apokatastasis, which is clearly stated at the end of *Liber Legum Regionum*¹:

"But when God wills it, everything can come to pass without any obstacle. In fact, there is nothing that can hinder this great and holy will. For even those who are convinced to oppose God do not resist by their own power, but are in evil and in error, and this can last only for a short time, because God is good and gentle and allows all natures to remain in the state in which they are and to govern themselves by their own will. Yet, at the same time, they are influenced by the things that are done and by the plans that have been devised (i.e., by God) to help them. For this order and this governance that have been given [by God], and the mutual interaction of beings, temper the force of the natures so that they can neither be entirely harmful nor completely harmed, as they were before the creation of the world. And a time will come when even this remaining capacity for doing evil will be ended by the instruction that will be received under a different arrangement of things: and once this new world is constituted, all evil movements will cease, all rebellions will come to an end, the foolish will be convinced, the deficiencies will be filled, and there will be safety and peace, as a gift from the Lord to all natures"².

This concept implies a universalist eschatology: all will eventually be restored to God. The Bardaisan Apocatastasis is thus a return of all creation to its original state of harmony, anticipating similar ideas later developed by Origen. Evil will disappear completely, as Origen³, Gregory of Nyssa⁴, Evagrius, Isaac of Nineveh⁵, Sergei Bulgakov⁶ and other universalists will repeat. To this end, God ordains a work of teaching and persuasion, so that those who are immersed in evil may be purified and healed. Bardaisan again anticipates Origen's theology in this respect⁷. Christ represented as Logos plays an important role in both the creation and soteriology - and the latter, in Bardaisan's conception, as in Origen's theology, culminates in apocatastasis⁸. In their thought apocatastasis, far from being a doctrine of pagan origin - as it was repeatedly accused of being especially during the Origenist controversies - is firmly grounded in Christology⁹.

However, Bardaisan insists on the freedom of rational creatures – where restoration is not imposed, but freely accepted, thus preserving the balance between mercy and moral responsibility.

¹ "Liber Legum Regionum" is a work traditionally attributed to Bardaisan of Edessa, written in Syriac and known mainly under the full title: the "Book of the Laws of the Countries" (Syriac: Nomoi ton choron, Latin: Liber Legum Regionum). Ilaria Ramelli, "Origen, Bardaisan and the Origin of Universal Salvation," *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 2 (2009): 156.

² Ramelli, "Origen, Bardaisan and the Origin of Universal Salvation", 156-157.

³ Celia E. Rabinowitz, "Personal and Cosmic Salvation in Origen," *Vigiliae Christianae* 38, no. 4 (1984): 342–359. Gregory MacDonald, ed., *All Shall Be Well: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2011).

⁴ Alexandru Lazăr, "Human Freedom and the Hope of Universal Salvation: St. Gregory of Nyssa's Theological Dilemma", *Astra Salvensis* XII, nr. 24 (2024): 34-44.

⁵ Alexey Fokin, "Apocatastasis in the Syrian Christian Tradition: Evagrius and Isaac," in *Saint Isaac the Syrian and His Spiritual Legacy: Proceedings from the International Patristics Conference, Moscow, 2013*, ed. B. A. Lourie et al. (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015).

⁶ Paul Gavrilyuk, "Universal Salvation in the Eschatology of Sergius Bulgakov," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 57, no. 1 (2006): 110–132..

⁷ Ilaria Ramelli, *A Larger Hope? Universal Salvation from Christian Beginnings to Julian of Norwich* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 23.

⁸ Ilaria Ramelli, "Origen, Bardaisan and the Origin of Universal Salvation," *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 2 (2009): 158.

⁹ Ilaria Ramelli, "Origen, Bardaisan and the Origin of Universal Salvation," *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 2 (2009): 158.

In this context, the material world is not rejected or seen as essentially evil, but seen as part of a temporary plan of salvation. Evil is a transient disturbance of order, and historical time is the stage on which freedom and providence work together to bring about final restoration.

EPHREM THE SYRIAN

Ephrem the Syrian was a 4th-century Christian theologian and poet from Nisibis, a region in present-day Turkey. He is known for his hymns and theological writings, which have had a significant influence on Syriac Christianity and Orthodox theology in general.

The Cappadocian Fathers and St. Ephrem the Syrian were contemporaries to a certain extent and contributed significantly to the Christian theology of the fourth century. Even if one observes a more direct reference in particular to St Gregory of Nazianzus and St Gregory of Nyssa in an attempt to legitimize apocatastastic ideas in a language specific to the philosophical or rhetorical tradition¹, in the case of St Ephrem the references are not abundant nor direct.

Ephrem is not an explicit proponent of the doctrine of apokatastasis. However, his reflections on the therapeutic power of Christ and his victory not only over death but also over hell come very close to a universalist perspective and constitute at least important premises for the doctrine of apokatastasis, which later spread among Syriac Christians². The link between Ephrem the Syrian and apokatastasis is not direct, since Ephrem the Syrian is not known for explicitly promoting this doctrine. However, some of his poetic and theological writings reflect a profound eschatological and soteriological vision, which can be interpreted in the context of a hope for universal salvation and the restoration of all creation within the boundaries proposed by this theological idea.

In the works of St. Ephrem, the final moment of the end of the world is accompanied by the exhortation of a thorough preparation. Therefore, the attitude is not centered on an improvement of the word of the Gospel, but precisely on an awakening, because with the coming of the Lord on earth, every justification of sin will be annulled³. From this point of view "the state of those who have lived a life with God will be in the Light, separated from sinners and shining like the sun"⁴, and the sufferings of those in hell are regarded as a separation of man from God⁵. Yet in this sublime act Christ will not cease to be equally merciful and loving. St. Ephrem the Syrian includes in his works certain details of the Last Judgment, hoping that Christ's love will accompany man⁶. In this regard he brings an important detail: Christ the Judge will not sit on the throne in the type of judgment, as is depicted in the pages of scripture (cf. Daniel 7, 9-10; Matthew 25, 31-46; Revelation 20, 11), or even in the iconography of the Church⁷, but will stand to pass judgment, an attitude which does not generate the same fearful atmosphere⁸.

¹ Sebastian Brock, *Efrem Sirul. I. Ochiul luminos. Viziunea spirituală a lumii la Sfântul Efrem Sirul. II. Imnele despre Paradis*, trans. Ioan I. Ică jr. și Mircea Ielciu (Sibiu: Deisis, 1998), 156.

² Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 331.

³ Sfântul Efrem Sirul, *Despre cea de-a doua venire a Domnului nostru Iisus Hristos*, trans. Alexandru Prelipcean (Iași: Doxologia, 2018), 14.

⁴ Efrem Sirul, *Despre cea de-a doua venire a Domnului nostru Iisus Hristos*, 27.

⁵ Brock, *Efrem Sirul*, p. 155.

⁶ Alexandru Lazăr, "Anthropology in the Hymns of St. Ephraim the Syrian", *Astra Salvensis* XI, no. 22 (2023): 23.

⁷ Sfântul Efrem Sirianul, *Scrieri II, Colecția Ta Dogmata Ton Pateron*, trans. Ioan Ioniță (București: Editura Proxima, 2012), 27-28.

⁸ From this point of view the Last Judgment is not a day of vengeance, but of retribution. It shifts the idea from a fearful God who cynically wishes to punish man to a God who will take note of man's final decision: the desire for

In the work Hymns of Heaven, St. Ephrem leaves open the possibility that God's mercy may also embrace those outside Heaven:

"Blessed is the sinner who has found mercy here and has been counted worthy to enter the environs of Heaven, even if he remains outside, he may pass here by grace. I pondered, and again I was afraid, for I dared to think that there might be a place between the Garden and the Fire where those who have found mercy might be punished and obtain pardon"¹.

Reflecting on St. Ephrem's writings, Sebastian Brock explains that repentant sinners, though positioned at the lowest level of Heaven, still experience its healing presence simply by being near it. St. Ephrem, however, expresses some hesitation about suggesting that such a place might exist within the realm of eschatological Heaven – somewhere between Paradise and the fires of Hell. Ultimately, he finds reassurance in the belief that, just as God's cloud encompasses all of creation – both the righteous and the wicked – so too will His mercy extend even into Gehenna². These statements leave open the possibility of universal salvation.

There are certain passages in the Scripture that give the impression of a possible partial apocatastasis that includes those who have not committed sins and blasphemies against the Holy Spirit: *"Truly I say to you, all things will be forgiven to the sons of men, as many sins and blasphemies as will be blasphemed. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit has no forgiveness for ever, but is guilty of eternal damnation"* (Mark 3:28-29), Matthew is more categorical: *"neither in this age, nor in the one to come, will he be forgiven"* (Matthew 12:32).

The attempt to define sin against the Holy Spirit in human logic is doomed to failure and impotence. Some have said that to sin against the Holy Spirit is to deny both the truth and God³, others have said that it represents the two extremes of theological virtues. The circumscription of sin against the Holy Spirit in human judgment remains a mystery. Since it is a question of the inner, intimate connection with the Spirit and therefore of the presence of God in the human soul, one cannot perceive externally the degree to which this evidence of God is denied and when it is demonically reversed

In the conception of Ephrem the Syrian God has freely forgiven the sins of many people but of the most grievous sin (Matthew 12:32) the punishment will be required in hell no sin will resist repentance except this one. But not even this sin will be able to prevent a person from being justified. God, after giving the reward in Gehenna, will reward this person in the Kingdom⁴.

Ephrem the Syrian was known for his emphasis on humility, repentance and the importance of the prayer life, and his theology focuses more on living an authentic Christian life and a personal relationship with God, rather than complex theological speculations. In this sense, his teachings are less oriented towards speculative doctrines such as apocatastasis and more towards faith practices and daily spiritual life.

salvation or the desire to choose an unhappy eternity. Alexandru Lazăr, *Fragilitatea ființei - Premisă sensibilă a Îndumnezeirii* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2023), 116–134.

¹ Sfântul Efreem Sirianul, *Îmnele Raiului* (Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2010), 93.

² Brock, *Efreem Sirul*, 236. Raluca Mocean Pleșa, *Actualitatea Apocatastazei: Între Iubirea lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului* (București: Editura Eikon, 2021), 39.

³ Sfântul Nicolae Velimirovici, *Răspunsuri la întrebări ale lumii de astăzi: scrisori misionare* (București: Editura Sophia, 2002), 39.

⁴ Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 333.

ISAAC THE SYRIAN

In the writings of Saint Isaac the Syrian (7th century), the theme of *apokatastasis*—understood as the final restoration of all beings in God—appears in an implicit yet profound form, integrated into a theology of mercy and divine love that transcends the strict logic of retributive justice. Although Isaac does not use the term *apokatastasis* explicitly, his thought is often associated with this concept due to his strong emphasis on God's infinite compassion and the hope that divine mercy will have the final word in the history of salvation. The conviction that God is, above all, love dominates Isaac's thinking and serves as the foundation of his theological views and ascetical insights¹.

For Isaac, God's love is absolute and unconditional, remaining constant even toward sinners and demons. He repeatedly affirms that "God punishes with love, not with wrath", and that "even in hell, the love of God works"—statements which some modern commentators interpret as signs of a kind of universalist hope². However, Isaac avoids explicit eschatological speculation and does not dogmatically assert the restoration of all, but rather leaves open this possibility in light of a divine love that knows no limits³.

A key passage in this regard is where Isaac states: "*There is no part of malice in God, nor any desire for vengeance; rather, He acts only for good, even in His rebukes*". This theological perspective, marked by a therapeutic view of suffering and punishment, reflects the influence of a patristic anthropology that emphasizes healing and deification rather than eternal condemnation: God is not one who repays evil, but one who corrects it⁴.

At the same time, Isaac's thought must be understood within the context of Syriac-East spirituality, in which the mystical-contemplative dimension prevails over juridical categories. Within this framework, discussions of hell or final judgment are subsumed into a broader vision of the soul's progress in divine love and of participation in the divine life—even beyond the boundaries of death.

Unlike Origen, Isaac does not formulate a systematic theology of universal salvation but rather evokes the hope that God's mercy will ultimately triumph over retributive justice. In Homily 51, he declares with rare theological force:

"There is no sin that can overcome the love of God. [...] Do not call God just, for His justice is not like that of humans. In His Son, He has revealed Himself as merciful and full of love for humankind, to the very end"⁵.

Therefore, Isaac the Syrian does not propose *apokatastasis* in the strict sense used by Origen, but rather a radical hope in God's mercy, which might ultimately transfigure even the deepest forms of estrangement⁶. He does not deny the reality of hell or human freedom, but affirms that divine love continues to act even upon the fallen, in mysterious ways beyond our comprehension.

This position remains doctrinally ambiguous but profoundly meaningful from a spiritual and ethical perspective.

¹ Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 35–36.

² Kallistos Ware, "Dare We Hope for the Salvation of All? Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Isaac the Syrian," *The Collected Works Volume I: The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 201.

³ James Henry Collin, "Isaac Qatraya and the Logical Problem of Evil," *Religions* 13, no. 12 (2022): 15.

⁴ Alvin F. Kimel Jr., "Preaching Apokatastasis: St. Isaac the Syrian and the Grammar of the Kingdom," *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 58, no. 1-4 (2017): 200.

⁵ Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte despre nevoiță* (Bacău: Editura Bunavestire, 1997), 239.

⁶ Patrik Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Niniveh* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 198.

CONCLUSION

The theological investigation carried out in this study has clearly revealed that in the Syriac tradition, the discourse of final salvation is not dominated by images of punitive judgment, but by an eschatological hope deeply rooted in the loving and merciful nature of God. Far from being a marginal position, this vision has been a distinctive feature of such leading thinkers as Bardaisan, Ephrem the Syrian and Isaac the Syrian, each offering a unique but convergent approach to the idea of universal salvation.

Bardaisan, in the second century, articulated a theology of cosmic restoration that combines freedom of the will with the idea that all rational creatures will eventually be restored to divine harmony. He envisioned a providential order in which evil is temporary and God's plan seeks the reconciliation of all natures. Following in his footsteps, but in a poetic-symbolic form, Ephrem the Syrian expressed the same eschatological hope in liturgical and metaphorical language, in which the fire of judgment appears not as an agent of condemnation but as a light that reveals and heals. Isaac the Syrian carries this insight to its climax, stating unequivocally that God's love is stronger than death and that no sin, however grave, can stop divine mercy from working towards restoration. In his conception, hell itself is a form of misunderstood love that continues to call for conversion even after death.

Through a comparative analysis of these authors, the study has shown that at the heart of Syriac theology is a radical reinterpretation of the idea of 'divine fire': not as eternal punishment, but as the purifying energy of love. This vision rejects rigid dualisms between justice and mercy, between election and damnation, proposing instead an anthropology open to restoration and a God who remains faithful to his love to the end, towards all creation.

Although Syriac theology offers a profound and poignant perspective on divine love, the conclusion of universal salvation cannot be unreservedly endorsed, even within this tradition. Although Bardaisan, Ephrem, and Isaac the Syrian propose an eschatological vision in which God's love has the last word, this approach, however coherent within its own system, does not undo the fundamental tensions between human freedom and divine justice. To postulate that all will be saved, regardless of their conscious choice, risks turning divine love into an overwhelming force that nullifies freedom, reducing human moral responsibility and rendering the call to repentance meaningless.

Moreover, the interpretation of "fire" as a mere purifying energy neglects the serious dimension of sin and the reality of separation from God, a reality constantly affirmed in other patristic and biblical traditions. Even in the vision of Isaac the Syrian, where hell is seen as misunderstood love, the ambiguity persists: if love is not recognized and accepted, can it still be salvific? The libertarian and continuous refusal of grace is not a purely theoretical scenario, but a concrete possibility.

Therefore, although the Syriac tradition revives a valuable dimension of divine mercy, this does not justify abandoning theological discernment that takes into account the whole spectrum of Christian revelation. Hope must not be confused with certainty, and love, in order to be authentic, must also respect the possibility of refusal. In this sense, universal salvation remains a theological aspiration rather than a guaranteed doctrine.

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BIONOTE:

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